

WHAT IS THE PROBLEM?

a sermon by Dr. David Palmer, United Methodist Church of Kent, Jan. 17, 2016
Based on Genesis 3:1-13, Romans 5:6-10

Last Sunday was the beginning of a sermon series entitled, “Ten Truths that Change Life,” during which we are looking at key Biblical truths which are transformational in how they enable us to understand and approach life. Last week, we looked at the Biblical truth about our identity and the declaration of the Bible that you are created by God in the image of God. We continue the series this morning. Let us begin with a moment of prayer . . .

If you go to the doctor because you are suffering from some ailment, the very first thing they do is . . . have you fill out some paperwork with your personal information and how you are going to pay for this . . . and then the primary question that the doctor asks is, “What is the problem?” You, of course, will describe your symptoms, but the doctor is asking the bigger question as to what is causing the symptoms. The key step in healing your ailment will be to correctly diagnose the problem.

The Bible follows exactly this process in its opening pages. The first thing the Bible does is establish your identity—as we saw last week—that you are a child of God. The very next thing the Bible does is ask the question, “What is the problem?” That question is at the center of the story that we heard in our Old Testament reading from the book of Genesis—the story of Adam and Eve.

The question is foundational for people in every age. Human beings suffer from all sorts of ailments. People suffer from anxiety and insecurity; they suffer from conflicts with one another, and a general lack of peace in the world; they suffer from guilt and sorrow, they suffer from fear about the future, and a lack of meaning and purpose in the present. Human beings wrestle with all sorts of physical ailments, but the larger and yet more difficult ailments are the spiritual ones. People sense that they lack wholeness; they are afflicted with a spiritual malaise.

All these things, of course, are symptoms. The key question is: What is the cause; what is the fundamental human problem? Only when we diagnose the problem can we come up with the answer.

When it comes to diagnosis, there are two basic things that can go wrong. Sometimes people will go to the doctor with a set of troublesome symptoms, but in spite of a lot of effort by experts, they can never quite figure out what the problem is. [*no diagnosis*] The same thing happens in human life in general. People will suffer from a lack of peace and wholeness—both within themselves and in their relations to others—but never figure out the fundamental problem, and so their troubled condition stays the same.

If you no diagnosis—if you can’t figure out the problem—you end up looking for things that at least promise in some way to make you feel better. Maybe you’ll win the Powerball lottery; that would make you feel better! Lots of people tried that this past week. They felt worse when they wound up with worthless tickets. But studies have shown that even the people who win lotteries, in the long run, generally do not end up

any happier; because getting a pile of money does not address the fundamental sickness of the soul. It might even make things worse. We need to identify and address our real human problem.

But the other big thing that can go askew in the realm of diagnosis is when we are trying to identify the problem and the wrong diagnosis is made. This results in the wrong therapy being applied, which can lead to even more troubles. Within human history, there have been multiple times when people have made the wrong diagnosis of the human problem, and have thus come up with the wrong prescription and have thereby caused even more troubles. One of the most classic examples of that in world history can be seen in the past century or so—in the philosophy of Karl Marx, whose philosophy ruled over nearly half the world's population fifty years ago, and still persists in places today. Karl Marx said that human beings are economic animals, and our problem is economic disparity—a wealthy class owns the means of production, while the working class just slaves away. Religion, he said, is part of the problem, because it just supports the status quo. So the solution is to get rid of the owners and get rid of religion and get rid of property altogether—have everything owned by everyone, and pretty soon, he said, paradise would ensue. The government, he said, would just fade away. People would freely produce and share in the fruits of their common labor and would live in peace and happiness and plenty. If you want to see Marxism in full swing today, just look at North Korea.

Marxism was a disaster. Marxist governments did not fade away, but became some of the most oppressive and war-mongering in history. The people labored, but productivity was terrible, because there was no incentive to improve processes. Marxist economies became characterized by scarcity rather than plenty, and there was still a division between the haves and have-nots, with the top party members being the haves and the people being the have-nots. Marxism produced the opposite of paradise.

What went wrong? Marx misdiagnosed the human problem, and so made all the wrong prescriptions. He pointed to a human ailment—the sometimes large division between rich and poor, which is also critiqued in the Bible, but he completely misjudged the human condition and missed the real problem, which is much deeper. The fundamental human problem is a spiritual one; it is correctly diagnosed in the one book that Marx rejected, in the opening pages of the Bible, where it is dramatically addressed and illuminated in the story of Adam and Eve.

The story seems on the surface to be a simple one. A man and woman are in a garden, with a tree that has forbidden fruit, and a talking snake, and an unfolding story line that ultimately has God strolling in the garden and the people hiding from God behind the shrubbery. These elements are markers which tell you that you are not supposed to read this story literally. Generally if you pick up a storybook that has talking animals, you know that it is not meant to be read as a historical account; and the same is true with the story of the Garden of Eden. This is not a quaint story about some quirky event that happened in some garden millenia ago. This is an Old Testament parable that speaks profoundly about our human condition and our human problem.

The first human character in the story does not have a name. Adam in Hebrew is not a name; it is a word that means “human being.” This indicates that the human characters in this story represent everyone. They are not two people who lived in some distant past. Adam and Eve are you and me.

They are created by God and placed in a wonderful world—themes that we talked about in the sermon last week. God blesses them with all that they need, and they in response are called to be obedient and faithful to God. This is represented in the story in the fact that they are given the fruit of many trees to eat, and at the same time they are commanded to not eat the fruit of one particular tree. But temptation slithers in—in the form of the snake. The heart of the temptation is posed in the story in the words of the serpent: “If you eat the fruit of this tree, you will be like God.” The woman and the man take the fruit and eat.

Here is the essence of what the Bible will call “sin.” Sin is putting ourselves in the place of God—deciding that we will call the shots, we will go our own way, no matter what God says. Sin is the breach between human beings and God, which then results in division and blaming and fighting and misery among human beings. In the story, the man blames the woman for giving him the apple to eat; she blames the snake. The fighting gets worse in the next story, where Cain kills his brother Abel.

In sin human beings try to exalt themselves—to be “like God”—but they end up in disorder and instability, and discover that they are in fact weak and vulnerable. In the story, the man and the woman after disobeying God discover that they are naked. This does not mean that they discover their sexuality. It is much earlier in the Genesis account that they are told to “be fruitful and multiply” [Genesis 1:28]; so they are already quite aware of their sexuality. What they discover is their vulnerability—that they are exposed to danger and trouble. So they hide, because they are afraid.

What a picture of our human condition—how in alienation from God we end up in fear, hiding ourselves from God, distrusting one another. Ultimately, human beings try to answer their weakness by looking for sources of strength and salvation around them, and they end up putting their trust in all kinds of false gods, such as money or power or political systems—but none of it brings deliverance.

In all this the story of Adam and Eve makes clear what our fundamental human problem is. The problem is sin—our alienation from God, which then results in the self-centeredness and fighting, the emptiness and anxiety, the exploitation of others, the abuse of the planet, and all the kinds of foolishness that we see in the world today. The answer will be for us to somehow come back into a real connection and a right relationship with God.

If Karl Marx had realized that the human problem is sin, he would have known that even if you kill off all the owners and give the property to the state, you will have solved nothing, because the new rulers will still be caught up in the quest for power, people will still be self-centered and won't want to work hard if it only benefits others, and people will still suffer from a deep spiritual malaise, because they are far more than the economic animals that Marx supposed them to be. Marxism failed, as many human philosophies have, because it did not grasp the human problem.

A sharp contrast to Karl Marx can be seen in another figure in recent history who addressed a huge social ailment but did so successfully—Martin Luther King. Grounded in Christian faith, Martin Luther King wrote this about the human problem and its solution: “Human beings are sinners, in need of God’s grace. In magnanimous love, God freely offers to do for us what we cannot do for ourselves. By faith we are saved, and filled with God; and God operating through us will bring unbelievable changes in our individual and social lives.

There is so much frustration in the world because we have relied on gods rather than God. We have genuflected before the god of science only to find that it has given us the atomic bomb. We have worshiped the god of pleasure only to discover that thrills play out and sensations are short-lived. We have bowed before the god of money only to learn that there are such things as love and friendship that money cannot buy and that in a world of depressions, stock market crashes, and bad business investments, money is a rather uncertain deity. These transitory gods are not able to save us or bring happiness to the human heart. Only God is able. It is faith in him that we must rediscover. With this faith we can transform bleak and desolate valleys into sunlit paths of joy and bring new light into the dark caverns of pessimism.” [Strength to Love, p. 51]

Martin Luther King was enormously concerned about the problem of racism, but he knew what the fundamental problem is that gives rise to racism—the problem is sin. [*Human beings are sinners.*] He also knew that God has provided us with the answer to sin. The answer is described in the passage we heard from Romans: “While we were weak, at the right time Christ died for the ungodly. God proves his love for us in that while we were sinners Christ died for us. We are justified by his blood, and saved through him.” (Romans 5:6-10) Christ answers the problem of sin by giving his life for us on the cross, so that we can be forgiven and brought back to God. We can receive what Christ has done—as Martin Luther King noted—through faith; and as we are made right with God, it is then that “God operating through us will bring unbelievable changes in our individual and social lives.”

King knew that the fundamental answer to racism would be a spiritual one—a transformation of human hearts and minds. So his base was the churches, his strength was his trust in God, his method was the nonviolent example of Jesus, and his target was the conscience of the American people. And he brought about change, because, as he said, “with faith in God we can transform bleak and desolate valleys into sunlit paths of joy.”

In a world full of all kinds of ailments, we will never get anywhere until we correctly diagnose the problem. When we know that the root problem is sin, then we perceive that the answer is to be found in what God can do within us through the transforming power of Jesus Christ. We will look further at the answer of Jesus in a future installment of this sermon series. But we will have taken a huge step toward healing when we know what we need. We need God’s grace, which we can receive today when we open ourselves to the saving presence of Christ.